

Mutants and the Metaphysics of Race

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“Mutation—it is the key to our evolution. It has enabled us to evolve from a single-celled organism to the dominant species on the planet. This process is slow, normally taking thousands and thousands of years, but every few hundred millennia evolution leaps forward.”

Professor Charles Xavier makes this statement about the evolution of *Homo sapiens* in the opening monologue of the first *X-Men* film. But what about *Homo superior*? As any X-pert can tell you, Magneto coins the phrase in the original *X-Men #1*, claiming, “The human race no longer deserves dominion over the planet earth! The day of the mutants is upon us! The first phase of my plan shall be to show my power ... to make *Homo sapiens* bow to *Homo superior*!”

The way many of the X-Men characters talk makes it sound like mutants are a new species, a new “race” separate from the human race.. However, this is not the way we use the word *race* most of the time, referring to different groups of people within humanity. Rather, Mutants sound like the kind of races we see in *The Lord of the Rings*, where humans, dwarves, elves, and hobbits are all different races.

There’s a big problem with thinking of mutants as a race in the sense of a new species, though. There’s little in common among mutants besides what’s already common to all of humanity. If they’re a species, the only thing that marks them as a species is that each has a different mutation. Even the X-Gene, which we’ll consider in detail shortly, occurred within the general human population and not just in mutants (until very recently in the comic books, at least, when the Scarlet Witch removed the X-Gene from almost everyone). To coalesce into a species, mutants would need much more in common than one gene or a cluster of genes. A group with an extremely diverse set of mutations isn’t coherent enough to be a species. At best they’re the first step toward a new species.

So even though Magneto assigns the name *homo superior* to mutants, it seems premature to think of mutants as a species. If mutants have not yet formed a race in the sense of a separate species, are they then a race in the same sense as races within humanity (the races that we distinguish based on characteristics like skin color, hair type, and so on)?

Race and the X-Gene

If we want to find out if Nightcrawler, Mystique, Havok, and Rogue, as mutants, are members of a race, then the first task is to look at some views of what races are.

One view is that races are biological categories based purely in genetic difference and/or ancestry relations. This was probably the dominant understanding of race for most of the time from the African slave trade until the middle of the 20th century, when many scientists’ understanding of DNA led many scientists to reject the idea of race altogether. If races are something like a sub-species of humanity, then we would expect the genetic similarity within each race and the genetic differences between races to be similar to the

genetic similarity within, and differences between, sub-species groups of non-human animals (for example, dog breeds).

This turns out to be false though. Only .2% of human genetic material will differ between any two randomly-selected people. Only 6% of that .2% is due to differences between racial groups, which amounts to .012% of all human variation. This means that almost all of human genetic variation appears within each racial group. Only a tiny amount of the ways that human beings differ can have anything to do with racial differences.¹

Compare this with sub-species groups in other animals. The genetic similarity between human racial groups is much closer than the genetic similarity between any non-human sub-species groups. Scientists can measure how close two populations are genetically². Gray wolf sub-species are measured at .7. Lizard sub-species a mile apart in the Ozarks are .4. Human populations average at around .15 but can range between .08 and .25³. Human populations aren't as genetically distinct as sub-species of other species, and most scientists don't treat human races as sub-species the way we consider German Shepherds to be a sub-species of dog and Rhode Island Reds to be a sub-species of chicken.

Now apply this reasoning to mutants. Mutations in the Marvel Universe occur in all the major racial and ethnic groups. For many years, the X-Men comic books didn't give much explanation why some people are mutants. They just treated mutants as having some special powers that they were born with (often activated at puberty). The powers were the result of mutations in DNA. By the time of *X-Factor* #1 in the 80s, they began calling it a special X-factor, which is still pretty unclear but does suggest a common cause to all mutations among mutants. More recently, the comic books and movie series have both given a much more specific explanation. *X-Men: The Last Stand* explains mutant powers as coming from one single gene, called the mutant X-Gene. Every mutant has it, and it somehow explains their powers, although we're not given more explanation than that in the movie. Warren Worthington II, the father of the Angel, develops a method of suppressing the gene and neutralizing the special abilities it leads to.

Recent comic books give a little more information, which is relevant to whether mutants are a race. Several facts are important. First, the X-Gene does not appear only in mutants. Many mutants received the X-Gene from their non-mutant parents. The X-Gene, which occurs on the 23rd chromosome, is not activated in every person who has it. A group of ancient aliens, called the Celestials, seeded the gene into the population, and it was passed on until the current generation. Normal humans have had the X-Gene for quite a while without being mutants.

The situation is also more complicated than just one gene explaining all the varied mutations, which would be scientifically implausible. In *House of M* #2, the Beast explains mutant abilities as coming from a cluster of genes rather than just one, and perhaps that cluster of genes is what the term *X-Gene* actually refers to. The Beast describes the X-Gene in *Astonishing X-Men* #25 as releasing "exotic proteins" that cause other cells to produce mutations. So the mutations themselves are not directly due to the X-Gene, and that's why the X-Gene can be the same gene or cluster of genes while producing such radically different mutations in all the different mutants. Something else explains exactly what mutations occur. The X-Gene, if activated, only explains why the

mutations occur at all. If not activated, the gene simply sits there not doing anything, except getting passed on to the next generation.

Mutants and Biological Race

So what do mutants have in common genetically that distinguishes them from the rest of humanity? Not the X-Gene, apparently, since that's been present in humanity since the Celestials planted it in our ancestors. Even so, one gene or cluster of genes is much less significant than the number of genes that affect the traits we usually associate with a race. And as we've seen it's hard to see race as a biological category because the variation among members of a race is not much less than the variation among all humans. Just think about the variety of racial backgrounds and national origins among mutants. Storm is from Kenya; Forge is Native American; Sunfire is from Japan; Rictor is Latino; Colossus and his siblings are from Siberia; Gateway is an aboriginal Australian; Wolverine is from northern Alberta in Canada; Cannonball and his siblings are from Kentucky; Banshee is Irish; Jubilee is Chinese American; Wolfsbane is Scottish; Apocalypse is from ancient Egypt; Arclight is Dominican.

Mutants come from virtually every racial background, and thus the group of all mutants is quite diverse genetically. Now add all the genetic modifications that cause all their powers, and you find far more diversity than occurs in any one race. Mutants are even further from being a biological sub-species than races are.

Additionally, mutants aren't self-contained or reproductively-isolated, even if they might end up like that in the future (for example, in "Days of Future Past," which we'll consider shortly). If races are biological, then they must constitute some kind of genetic population. In the first generation of large numbers of mutants, you simply don't have a population, even if you might later end up with one. Consider also how mutants do not just reproduce with each other, but with humans, too; this makes it nearly impossible to see mutants as a biological race.

One view, now very much out of favor but once highly influential, took races to have what might be called biological essences. The members of any race have a biological essence that they share with all other members of their race. These essences were supposed to have explained why certain visible features were common to each race but different from most other races. Contemporary science has especially refuted the idea that these essences give rise to differences in intelligence, moral character, and so on.

Not many scientists accept this view about race today, but if you found a population with a biological essence, you might see it as a reason for thinking of that population as a sub-species race. The X-Gene does at first seem like a good candidate for such a racial essence, except that many humans also have it. Apart from that, it's hard to see what might be a racial essence for mutants. Since mutants don't come from any common stock, the only thing they have in common is that they have a power.

There is the X-Gene itself, but as we've seen that wouldn't distinguish mutants from humans. The best we could say is that *activated* X-Genes could be a very minimal biological essence. But a racial essence in the classical sense was supposed to explain *all* the distinctive characteristics of a race, and the X-Gene alone doesn't do that. So, for all these reasons, mutants are not a biological race. But since races probably aren't

biological anyway, maybe that's not a serious problem. If races by definition are biological, and if there are no biological races, then there are no races.

Mutants and Social Races

Many contemporary philosophers take a different approach to race, however. They reject race as a biological category but insist on race as a social reality. If this view is right, then perhaps mutants are a social race, even if they're not a biological race.

A lot of what we mean by race isn't biological at all. People base racial categories on things that result from biological facts, such as physical appearance. But if we were to use similar methods of categorizing mutants, we would end up placing the Beast into the same race as Nightcrawler, because he is *blue and furry* (sometimes, anyway) and not because of any similarity in their powers. And once we as a society begin to categorize people along such lines, we tend to include cultural differences that aren't determined by DNA and ancestry alone. For example, without any biological basis, some races have been thought of as having moral, intellectual, or physical capabilities and deficiencies. Stereotypes thus emerge. Having blue fur, pointy ears, and a tail doesn't make Nightcrawler satanic, and the mutation that led to his fur, ears, and tail has nothing to do with his religious views. In fact, he is a pious Roman Catholic who almost became a priest. Having dark-colored skin, fur, horns, or wings doesn't make someone religious or non-religious, smart or stupid, moral or immoral, cowardly or courageous. Racial prejudices have conceived the people we call black as intellectually inferior. Similarly, prejudice against mutants suggest they are to be feared because of how they look or what they do without any genuine basis in reality.

So what sense can we make of the social reality of race? We all accept the reality of categories that don't have their basis in biology or DNA. For instance, when we talk about politics we refer to certain people as liberals or progressives and others as conservatives, libertarians, Democratic socialists, and so on. When we come up with such categories, we are picking out genuine features of the people we're classifying that don't depend on genetics. Granted, there are complicating factors: we sometimes oversimplify, some people defy categorization, there are borderline cases, and there are categories that might be useful in explaining voting behavior or political philosophy that we haven't thought to put a name to. Nevertheless, things that people do and things we think about people's political beliefs allow us to categorize them usefully.

So too with races. We can often identify someone's race by looking at them, at least with most racial classifications in the United States. (This was not always so. For example, Irish people were sometimes classified as black in the Nineteenth Century.) The features we use to identify someone's race may well have been determined by their DNA, for example skin color. But we need to realize that historical and social factors partly determine which biological traits we've picked out as ways of determining who is in what group. The populations that developed into the groups we call races were different according to skin color, hair type, and bone structure, and as a result suffered much wrongful treatment. Imagine if their differences had instead been in height, handedness, and whether their earlobes were attached. We would still have something like races.

Along these lines, you could imagine a society that turns mutants into a social race. We see the beginnings of isolation in several X-Men stories. For example, in "Days

of Future Past,” we’re given a possible future in which mutants are hunted down and put into concentration camps, where their powers are inhibited. We’re not told much about the details, but we could certainly expect such a world to lead to mutants becoming a separate group, whose mutations might pass on to the next generation if they’re allowed to breed and whose social separation allows them to be treated as their own group with a biological element common to all of them (having an activated X-Gene that causes mutation).

Another example involves the island nation of Genosha, which secretly rounded up mutants to be reconditioned and genetically manipulated in order to serve Genosha as slaves, with their names and identities removed and their resistance to enslavement replaced with a desire only to serve. Mutants weren’t allowed to breed on their own in the story, as writer Chris Claremont told it in the comic books. Instead, their genetic information was combined with genetic information of others to produce ideal mutant slaves in the next generation. Whether this would satisfy the ancestry requirement some people want to include probably depends on what people might mean by ancestry, but the case could easily be modified to produce a situation more like “Days of Future Past.”

One reason to consider the Genoshan nation is that Claremont worked into the story several features that connect it nicely with historical and current features of race. In Genosha, mutants have a derogatory name—*Genejoke* (*X-Men* #235). Genoshans refer to someone testing gene-positive and thus qualifying for slavery as mutants (*X-Men* #236), which parallels negative treatment of people who are HIV-positive. While that’s not a racial issue, it does involve similar kinds of negative treatment, and if enforced segregation of any races were to occur nowadays in technologically-developed society, it almost certainly would involve gene-testing.

Claremont puts an unintentionally-ironic race comparison into the words of an official Genoshan informatape promoting Genosha in *X-Men* #237, which says, “Ours is a free land, where people are judged by deeds and character, not the color of their skin.” The irony of a nation that enslaves mutants pointing out that they don’t discriminate on the basis of skin color is very effective in communicating that what’s going on in Genosha is very similar to what’s far too often happened along racial lines. Indeed, mutants, like some racial minorities, are not even thought of as people. As the Carol Danvers personality, who controls Rogue during part of the Genoshan storyline, says, “Effectively, they become extensions of their jobs—perceived not as people any longer but organic machines” (*X-Men* #238).

Of course mutants have been called Muties for a long time in the comic books, and the fear of mutants by some in the general populace was Magneto’s original motivation for wanting mutants to rule humans. But the Genoshan case is particularly vivid in the comparison it invites with the treatment of slaves in the United States.

The Difference Between Mutants and Race

So, are mutants a race? One difficulty is that Bishop is black, but he’s also a mutant. Cable is white, and he’s a mutant, too. Every mutant has a racial background. Being able to talk about diversity of race, but being able to talk about diversity of race among mutants means if mutants are a race, then it’s not the sort that prevents you from being a member of more than one race. It’s not as if Cable is mixed race, with one parent who is

a mutant and another who is human. Both of his parents are fully mutants and fully white. Of course it's possible that someone could be both black and white. So being both black and a mutant doesn't mean absolutely that mutants aren't a race.

Additionally, races are usually thought of as being identifiable by visible characteristics. You might call powers visible, since once you know about the power you might guess that the person is a mutant (although in the Marvel Universe we should remember that people can have powers without getting them because of a mutation, such as Spiderman or the Hulk—both super-powered because of radiation). Then again some powers could be so insignificant that we might miss them, and even the person who has them might never discover them. This feels like it's pushing the helpful analogy between mutants and race.

Mutants as Race-Like

On the other hand, we often speak loosely and use certain classificatory terms in an extended or even metaphorical sense. For example, people sometimes refer to co-workers as family. They aren't related, and in the primary meaning of the term *family* they simply aren't one. But it has become acceptable to use the term to describe those who are like a family in their closeness. Public debate over same-sex marriage has sometimes centered on whether a couple of the same sex should call their relationship a marriage, when marriage has traditionally been a relationship between a man and a woman. Yet we frequently speak of bonds as marriages, even if they have nothing to do with a man and a woman. William Blake (1757-1827) wrote a book called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and he didn't think of heaven or hell as a man or a woman.

So are comic book characters just speaking loosely when they use racial language with reference to mutants? One indication that they might be is that they move back and forth between speaking of mutants as a species (using the label *homo superior*) and speaking of mutants as a part of humanity. Magneto does this in several of his appearances, even within the same comic book issue, and he does it in the films as well. So there might be some truth to what they're saying if we don't take it as literally as the writers may have intended it. X-Men stories draw a helpful analogy with the racial problems in our society, even if mutants aren't really a race.⁴

NOTES

¹ K. Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections", pp.30-105 of K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (1996) Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ.p.69, n.53.

² This measure is called heterozygosity.

³ See, for example, Tina Hesman, "No Trace of Race: Genome Sequencing Project proves nothing biological separates peoples" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 4, 2003.

⁴ I'd like to thank Winky Chin, Jonathan Ichikawa, and Avery Tooley for help at various stages of the development of this chapter.